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Research Methods for History

Edited by Simon Gunn
and Lucy Faire

Research Methods for History

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Research Methods for History

Edited by Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire

Edinburgh University Press

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Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire
Leicester, 2011

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Introduction: Why Bother with Method?

Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire

This book is about research methods in history, specifically those branches identified with the humanities: cultural history, political history and elements of other branches such as social history. By ‘research methods’ we mean here the tools or techniques appropriate to history as a field of study, together with ‘methodology’ or the larger principles which underpin the tools and techniques, and justify their usage.¹ We take ‘methods’ in both these senses to be a defining feature of any discipline or field of knowledge; how historians construct and investigate their object of study is one means by which history is distinguished from other disciplines that also have an interest in the past, such as archaeology or English studies.

In planning and writing the book we have been very conscious of the fact that research methods have all but disappeared as a component of historiography and a subject of debate among historians. In fields such as economic and demographic history, quantitative methods continue to be required as a preliminary to scholarly work and are taught as part of postgraduate training. But these have become twilight zones of the larger discipline; indeed, it is precisely the requirement for method as well as numeracy that is often blamed for the waning popularity of economic history at all levels. In large swathes of social, cultural and political history by contrast, dissertations, theses and books are written with barely a nod towards methodology. The influence of cultural history and the ubiquitous reference to ‘narrative’ and ‘identity’ are sometimes cited as factors here, though there appears to be no clear reason why they should obviate a consideration of matters of definition, procedure and analytical approach. More generally, the wholesale critique of an earlier social structural history which accompanied the cultural turn of the 1980s and 1990s appeared to sweep away much of the infrastructure that attended it, from data sampling to grand narratives. Histories have become ‘stories we tell about ourselves’.²

Beyond archival research, historians have conventionally tended to borrow their methods from the social sciences. The retreat we describe among historians is therefore all the more striking given the relative efflorescence of methods, old and new, in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and gender studies in recent years. Discourse analysis, visual methods, standpoint theory, content analysis, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) – to name but a few – have all taken root widely, yet have had limited impact on historical research and writing. Indeed, what has been significant about the various ‘turns’ affecting the human sciences over the last three decades – linguistic, spatial, material and so on – has been the extent to which they left the basic procedures of history intact. This situation contrasts with earlier phases of innovation in historical practice. The growth of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, was attended by a number of methodological departures including oral history, ‘history from below’, cliometrics and new forms of computer-based analysis. Indeed, in retrospect one could argue that the social history of these decades, so often associated with the influence of Marxism and feminism, was perhaps more accurately defined by its relationship to new ways of researching and representing the past.³

Complaints about the lack of attention to methodology among cultural and other historians are nothing new, of course. Criticism in recent years has come from a variety of directions, including those sympathetic to the new cultural history. The labour historian Richard Biernacki, for example, has argued that the cultural turn created an over-dependence on linguistic models of culture based on semiotics or sign-systems; instead, research should be organised around the comparative analysis of cultural practices and how they can be seen to work, materially as well as symbolically.⁴ A different view comes from the historian of childhood, Paula Fass, who suggests that the problems of much recent historical writing lie in its diffuseness and lack of rigour, resulting in ‘inquiries that are literally all over the place . . . [and] a profusion of styles and methods that seem to obey no rules but the unique bypaths of the individual historian’s mind’.⁵ By contrast with Biernacki, Fass urges a return to some of the methods of social history, including working with large bodies of source data as evidence (rather than with a small number of privileged texts) and careful placing of both historical agents and sources within a social and evidential context.

However, the most sustained methodological critique of recent historical writing has come from the cultural historian Peter Mandler. Mandler argued that an increasing theoretical sophistication in new forms of historical writing has obscured a lack of methodological precision. Like Fass, he identified *inter alia* a vagueness in how ideas or discourses were actually produced and received – their scope or ‘throw’ – and the concurrent lack of a theory of meaning, apart from a general (and under-developed) notion that meaning

is produced by opposition with an 'Other'. In order to give substance to the insights of recent cultural and political history, Mandler concluded, historians needed to reconnect to the social sciences:

If we really want to say something original about 'culture', I think we need to learn more about what psychologists *today* are proposing about such key concepts as 'meaning' and 'identity', or what psycholinguists have to say about 'discourse' and 'narrative', or what economists, for that matter, understand by 'needs' and 'desire'.⁶

This reconnection, in turn, is not to be merely at the level of theory but of social science methodology.

Peter Mandler's critique in particular met with a hostile response from cultural and other historians, who tended to view his proposals less as an argument for a new kind of cultural history than as an attack on cultural history *tout court*.⁷ This is not the place to re-enter this particular debate, but it does seem to us that Mandler was broadly correct in his diagnosis. Across wide fields of historical investigation a methodological dimension seems to have more or less disappeared, and in some cases to have been supplanted by a relatively narrow body of theory, in which Foucault looms large, but which itself is not always convincingly or critically apprehended. However, if we agree that a renewal of dialogue with the methods of the social and human sciences seems desirable, it is by no means clear *which* methods. Mandler points in the direction of psychology and economics but his footnotes are noticeably devoid of specific recommendations. Moreover, within the social sciences research methodology is a matter of contention, not something settled. The sociologist of science John Law, for example, has recently proposed the idea of 'creative mess' as the basis for a kind of anti-method. There is a contradiction, Law argues, between a world which is fluid, complex and messy and research methods which aim to simplify and clarify that world: 'Simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess.'⁸ This might seem appealing to historians trying to fathom the complexities of past social worlds on the basis of fragmentary sources and who are sceptical of the validity of applying present-day research methods to those worlds. But it ignores the fact that Law's intervention occurs in a field in which methodological justification is routinely required of researchers and that his intervention is not a rejection of method but the opposite: an attempt to 'imagine what research methods might be if they were adapted to a world that included and knew itself as tide, flux, and general unpredictability'.⁹

Nevertheless, if this is the case one is still forced to ask, why bother with method? The answer is a relatively simple one, and not specific to history.

Methods matter because the way we study a phenomenon shapes (or may even determine) the knowledge we derive of it. An understanding of, say, colonial rule or the fashion cycle, is integrally bound up with how we have gone about studying these phenomena. Indeed, one could go so far as to say in quasi-determinist mode that it is methods that produce knowledge, not ‘research’ in the abstract sense. Method should be understood broadly here to encompass everything from the original framing of the research hypothesis to the design of the study, the selection of the sources and the manner in which they are analysed. In other words, method is not just a matter of technique but ‘the way the whole problem is seen’, to use E. P. Thompson’s phrase, including which body of theory and concepts are brought to bear, what sources are deployed and how.¹⁰ As this implies, there is never only one way of approaching or answering a research question; it could always be done differently. A good exercise with researchers (and with oneself) is thus to ask: how could this research be carried out in another way from the one you have designed and why is your way to be preferred?

Methods, then, represent an essential intermediate process between ‘theory’ on the one hand and the sources or raw data on the other. They are what tie the various parts of research together and make it justifiable to others. This last point is often how the matter of method raises its head, sometimes in questioning from a colleague or supervisor, perhaps more often nowadays in the pragmatic form of a grant application to be completed, a seminar question to be answered, or a tenure panel to be satisfied. It is here too that the methodological naivety of some historical research may become all too visible, when judged by scholars from other branches of the humanities or social sciences versed in an array of specialist approaches and techniques.

The pressure to make explicit methodological assumptions is sometimes identified with the neo-liberal drive to ever-increasing transparency and accountability, now implanted in the academic audit culture. But it would be mistaken to imagine that this is the sole or even the principal driver for it hides a more fundamental issue that all researchers, historians included, must respond to. This is the question of how we justify our histories as knowledge, or, more precisely, what *kind* of knowledge our history represents. Here the inadequacy of arguing that history is simply a ‘story’ becomes apparent, for the question is then what kind of story, and how – if at all – it is differentiated from, say, fiction or biography. Novels too represent a form of knowledge but as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur argued, while history and fiction are both species of narrative, to conflate them risks disabling the former: ‘As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning’.¹¹

We should bother with methodology, in other words, because it is intimately

linked to epistemology, the grounds of knowledge. If historical research and historiography have no specialised, effective claim to knowledge, then it is unclear on what basis 'history' can claim to be a discipline at all. We are some way from this end game, of course, but it is a reminder of what is at stake. Perhaps more urgently than at any time for the last half-century, we need to identify, clarify and debate what we mean as historians when we say we are 'doing research'.

WHY THIS BOOK?

This book both reflects and intervenes in the larger context of academic history which we have just described. In the first place, it reflects the uncertainty among many historians about what exactly 'methods' mean or amount to in historical research. Some contributors to this book openly prefer the concept of 'approach' as designating a less stringent relationship between analytical process and sources. In general, it is noticeable that the closer they are to social sciences the easier historians find it to talk about methodology; the same applies to quantitative as against qualitative methods. Social and economic historians are well used to discussing data sets and computer-based techniques such as nominal record linkage, for example, and quantitative methods can be applied across social, cultural and political history as the chapter here by R. J. Morris indicates. Eliciting what historians do when they are working in archives – the commonest site of historical research – is much more difficult, however. Obviously, they are searching out and examining documents and other primary sources, but how they actually work on these sources is shrouded in mystery. Historical training routinely includes introduction to archives and sources; for some it may include palaeography or language training in order to be able to decipher primary texts generated in other time-periods and societies. But it is rare to find any explicit discussion of what choices might be made in the archive, what strategies pursued or how different types of sources might be interpreted. It is assumed that these skills will be absorbed by students or historians through a form of immersion, time and practice providing eventual mastery. Despite the burgeoning interest in the history of the archive over the last decade, there has been remarkably little discussion of the actual processes of archival research, or of what the historian and theorist Michel de Certeau termed the 'historiographical operation' by which the 'past', or its documentary traces, are turned into 'history' defined as a specific form of writing.¹²

Surveying research methods in English Gabriele Griffin has observed that for all their 'stunning and paradigm-shifting results', English scholars 'have remained surprisingly in- or possibly non-articulate about what they do to achieve these results'.¹³ Much the same observation could be made about many

branches of history. It is not for lack of literature in and around the subject. There exist a large number of practical introductions to historical research, often aimed at postgraduate and PhD students, which discuss types of sources and provide guidance on statistical and other approaches as well as valuable tips on how to write a history thesis.¹⁴ Many of the ‘how to do’ books focus on particular branches of history, such as local history.¹⁵ At the other end of the spectrum there are a good number of general texts on the ‘nature’ of history as a discipline and theory for historians, which deal more at the level of ideas and schools of thought than practices or methods.¹⁶

The purpose of this book is rather different from both these genres; it aims to contribute to a wider discussion of methods and methodology in historical research, particularly in areas of humanities history such as cultural and political history. In particular, we wish to foster an increased methodological literacy among historians, including postgraduate students of history, so that it becomes easier to discuss the issue of *how* we undertake research as well as what its results are. As we have already argued, these two dimensions are in practice tightly bound up with one another; what we find out about an aspect of the past is profoundly shaped by the methods we use to investigate it.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANISED

In fulfilling the aim of the book we have not attempted to provide a comprehensive review of all the research methods employed in historical studies or relevant to it. Rather, we have sought to bring together discussions of well-established or even taken-for-granted methods, such as archival research, with those that are less frequently used, at least in humanities history, such as GIS. Some of the methods here, such as landscape research and collective biography, have their own traditions and devotees; others, like material culture and language analysis, reflect newer trends in the field. We have likewise interpreted ‘method’ generously to include techniques like database analysis and oral history, approaches like visual analysis and performance studies, and categories such as ethics and temporality. In this last case, their inclusion is intended to underline our point that method covers a wide range of conceptual and theoretical choices, from how cultural difference is handled in the research process to which model of historical time or periodisation we wish to deploy. Such choices may – we argue will – profoundly affect the research and its outcomes.

The book is divided into five parts. Part 1 is concerned with what we term the ‘essentials’ of historical research: the archive, visual analysis, material culture and place. In the last two cases Alan Mayne and Jo Guldi encourage us to consider the material remains of the past in the form of artefacts

and landscapes, and how they can be integrated into historical analysis. The archive and visual culture by contrast are staple elements of historical research, although as Michelle King and Ludmilla Jordanova indicate, much of what we assume about them needs to be critically interrogated in the light of postcolonialism and new ideas about materiality.

Part 2 introduces two methods of researching individuals and groups, collective biography and life story. Again, the approaches discussed go beyond conventional wisdom in linking the individual and the collective. Krista Cowman shows how the 'subjective' dimension of collective biography differentiates the method from prosopography and allows the historian to make the most of fragmentary sources to explore marginal groups and experiences. Alistair Thomson likewise explores the significance of what is 'missing' as well as what is present in life stories as a way of making historical sense of people's lives.

Part 3 opens up computer-based techniques of historical research and reveals their value for studying topics in cultural and political history. Keith Lilley demonstrates how GIS can be applied to medieval maps and used to analyse environmental and topographical changes in the landscape over time. R. J. Morris similarly shows how databases can be used to explore topics such as patterns of voting and inheritance to reveal unexpected connections between variables. In both cases the technical language may initially seem off-putting, but the techniques themselves are relatively simple and can be used to harness and ask questions of large amounts of historical data.

Part 4 shifts attention to methods or approaches through which historians can probe the meanings generated by people and events in the past. Language is the most widespread meaning-making system and Julie-Marie Strange offers us ways of 'reading' language that are historically and contextually sensitive. Social behaviour too provides opportunities for decoding meanings. Simon Gunn draws on the metaphor and methods of performance studies to suggest how they can help us think analytically about how to interpret rituals, violence and everyday behaviour.

The final section, Part 5, widens the scope of methodology by prompting us to think about some of the basic categories that inform historical studies. Ethics have begun to permeate the research environment in recent years and William Gallois gives this a specific historical inflexion by enquiring what is at stake, ethically speaking, when historians study cultures whose values may be at odds with their own. Such questions bring historians into direct relationship with their object of study and Prashant Kidambi's reflection on time and temporality does likewise. All historians engage with time in their work, whether in the guise of change, continuity or periodisation. But there are different ways of representing historical time (cyclical, linear and so on) as well as of dividing it by 'period' (epoch, age, phase). The historian is therefore confronted

by important decisions when dealing with the most fundamental categories in their conceptual armoury, like time.

All the chapters in the book follow roughly the same format. In each case they begin with an account of the method or approach concerned, where it derives from and how it has come to inform modern scholarship, whether in history or related disciplines. Following from this, the chapters provide a description of the method itself, its basic characteristics and procedures, together with a discussion of debates about its validity, appropriateness and limitations. Discussion of the latter reminds us that we need to be as critical of methods as we are of sources and interpretations. Thereafter, contributors have been encouraged to demonstrate how their methods operate in practice by providing historical case studies, drawing on their own research as well as that of others for examples. The case studies themselves range across the medieval, early modern and modern periods and across different parts of the world, Africa, Asia and Australia as well as Europe. We have not attempted a strict division of chapters in terms of time period or geographical location. Undertaking historical research in colonial archives requires critical skills that we felt were important to expose, for reasons which Michelle King eloquently outlines, but all sources and methods make particular analytical demands on the researcher. We have also encouraged contributors, where possible, to sketch the methodological steps that researchers need to take in actually implementing a particular approach, whether in the form of prompts or questions to be asked.

In the end, though, the intended purpose of this book is to enhance discussion about methods and historiography, not to present a series of essays in 'how to do history'. This has implications for the way the book is used by readers. Researchers will naturally be keen to read the chapter which relates to the method/s deployed in their dissertation, thesis, article or book, or to the method/s which they are considering to use. Our intention, though, has been to stimulate a wider discussion not about this or that approach, but about methods in general. In reality, few historians use only one method in their work, even if they do not recognise much of what they do as methodological at all. Equally, those training as researchers in history should be expected to know about techniques other than their own, which they will need for fresh studies they may carry out in the future. So we are keen that readers try to sample a number of chapters to get a sense of the variety and richness of approaches that exist for undertaking historical research. After all, if history is 'an unending dialogue between the past and present', as E. H. Carr famously claimed, then we should not be seeking to close down the argument, as some scholars might wish to do. We should be seeking precisely the opposite: to extend the intellectual conversation by opening history up to more imaginative, reflexive and rigorous ways of researching the past.¹⁷

NOTES

1. The literature on methods and methodology is voluminous but for an excellent and relevant guide see William Outhwaite and Stephen Turner (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology* (London: Sage, 2007).
2. The phrase has become a cliché of course but for a more than usually informed usage of the notion see Quentin Skinner, 'The place of history in public life', <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-35.html>. The often indirect influence of Hayden White's writings in much of this is also significant; see for example, 'The historical text as literary artefact', *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 81–100.
3. For a sympathetic, detailed and wide-ranging evaluation of the shift from social to cultural history in the Anglo-American context see William Sewell, *The Logics of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
4. Richard Biernacki, 'Method and metaphor after the new cultural history', in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds), *After the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 62–92.
5. Paula Fass, 'Cultural history/social history: some reflections on a continuing dialogue', *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (Fall 2003), p. 41. Such debates can also be followed in journals such as *Rethinking History* and *History and Theory*.
6. Peter Mandler, 'The problem with cultural history', *Social and Cultural History* 1:1 (2004), p. 116.
7. See the articles by Carla Hess, 'The new empiricism'; Colin Jones, 'Peter Mandler's "Problem with Cultural History", or, is playtime over?'; Carol Watts, 'Thinking about the X factor or, what's the cultural history of cultural history?', in *Cultural and Social History* 1:2 (2004). See also Peter Mandler's response 'Problems in cultural history: a reply', *Cultural and Social History* 1:3 (2004), pp. 326–32.
8. John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.
9. Law, *After Method*, p. 7.
10. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 13.
11. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 118.
12. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 57. For the wider discussion of the archive see Tom Osborne, 'The ordinariness of the archive', *History*

- of the Human Sciences* 12:2 (1999), pp. 51–64 and the rest of the contributors to this issue as well as *History of the Human Sciences* 11:4 (1998); Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: the Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
13. Gabriele Griffin, *Research Methods for English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 1.
 14. See for example Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: a Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 4th edn (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2007); W. H. McDowell, *Historical Research: a Guide* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2002). Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: an Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) is more critical and ambitious in its approach but remains largely within the genre.
 15. For instance, Kate Tiller, *English Local History: an Introduction*, 2nd edn (Stroud: Sutton, 2002); Philip Riden, *Local History: a Handbook for Beginners* (Chesterfield: Merton Priory Press, 1998).
 16. For example Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing History* (London: Hodder, 2003); Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press 2008); Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (eds), *The Houses of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 2006); Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 4th edn (Harlow: Longman, 2006).
 17. E. H. Carr, *What is History* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 30.

PART I

The Essentials

Working With/In the Archives

Michelle T. King

Archival research is for many modern historians the bread and butter of their professional existence, as paradigmatic a disciplinary marker as the laboratory experiment for the physical scientist or fieldwork for the anthropologist. It is often the transformative liminal experience that most distinguishes a student of history from the practicing historian: the act of getting one's own hands dirty (sometimes literally, handling mouldering documents covered in decades' or centuries' worth of dust) is one in a series of steps towards independent historical thinking and writing. The student must prove her mettle by first finding, then wrestling with unruly primary source documents, taming them into some coherent written form for public consumption. Yet modern historians have only recently begun to examine the methodological foundations upon which so much of their work is built.¹

Given its centrality to disciplinary identity, my goal in this chapter is not to convince researchers of the suitability and appropriateness of archival research as a historical method, but rather to do the opposite. Here I want pry archival research loose from its privileged position as a taken-for-granted historical method – not in order to minimise its utility or replace it with a particular alternative, but so as to examine it more closely and deploy it more consciously, suggesting both its potential and limitations. While archives may contain all manner of historical documents besides manuscripts and written texts (including drawings, prints, maps, photographs, film, music, material artefacts and digital files), I will focus my remarks here on the paradigmatic textual archives that have informed modern historical practices since the nineteenth century.

What constitutes an archive? How have archives been created and maintained? How do we work within, against or around the imposed order and limits of the archive when conducting our own research? What might a history look like that takes into conscious consideration both the internal logic of the

archives and the conventions of documentary evidence? What new histories are made possible, and what old assumptions will require readjustment? While the motivation for posing such questions may derive in part from theoretical challenges to normative historical practice made prominent in the last few decades, my approach here is less epistemological than practical. This chapter aims to provide concrete examples of how some historians have attempted to respond to these questions, in the hopes that researchers may draw inspiration from them for their own projects.

One popular vision of the archetypal historical Archive (distinguished here with a capital 'A') comes from the movie version of Dan Brown's blockbuster thriller, *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Among its mishmash of references to Christian history and European cultural artefacts, one scene in particular alludes to the work of the historian, in which the assiduous hero and heroine stumble into the hidden archive of a centuries-old underground brotherhood, sworn to protect the secret of the Holy Grail. Each wall of the tidy room is covered with glass-covered bookshelves, on which sit neatly labelled file boxes and bundles of documents, all artistically arranged. Touching a bundle of scrolls, the hero-scholar exclaims, 'This is incredible, look at this . . . These records go back thousands of years . . . Good God, could these really be the Grail documents?!'²

Working historians may smile at this Hollywood version, since the primary sources contained in any given archive are rarely so monumental, easy-to-find, well-organised or even dust-free.³ Yet several ideas dominate this filmic version, which may serve as a useful starting point for the observations to follow. Above all else, this archetypal Archive is a collection of *written* texts, a kind of sacred treasure-house of memory. Moreover, some kind of *authority* – a state, an institution, an organisation, or here, a secret brotherhood – has taken upon itself the task of gathering and organising these written documents that pertain to its own history, as well as controlling access to them. Finally, this Archive embodies both *completeness* and *hiddenness*, and their corollary of secrets unveiled. Everything essential to know is contained in this Archive; the industrious historian need only to sift patiently through all of its documents in order to find all of the answers. That which the Archive preserves and hides, the historian brings to light.

Real historians not cast by Hollywood, however, have through both practical experience and theoretical deliberation challenged these normative notions about the nature of the archives and archival research. Instead of appearing as written, authoritative, complete and hidden, actual archives (distinguished by a lower-case 'a') may upon closer inspection appear far less stable, to the point of being unwritten, subversive, partial and exposed. Moving from a fixed and firm understanding of the archives to something more fluid and flexible, though, probably requires more doing than thinking. It may well be

that researchers will need to venture unassisted into the archives first, in order to gain a sense of its site-specific densities and peculiar formations, before the ideas discussed here can be put to best use. This was true at least in my own case: the evolution of my own thinking on archival research began at the National University of Singapore and the National Archives of Singapore, where I spent several months in 2001 looking at original registers of correspondence held there, as well as microfilm copies of correspondence from the Public Record Office, exchanged between colonial officials in the nineteenth-century Straits Settlements and their superiors in London. This chapter is an outgrowth of the seeds planted during that archival experience, after several generations of germination.

THE ORIGINS OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Before we can begin to question paradigms of archival research, it is helpful to consider how they came to be in the first place. Archival research and the historical writing that has generally arisen from it have always been intrinsically bound to the legitimation of state power. The maintenance (and fabrication or destruction) of written historical records is a potent idea that has allowed different groups to lay claim to their own version of the past and consolidate control over the present.⁴ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern archival institutions filled a critical role in the creation of new historical narratives for emerging nation states. One of the first acts of the French Revolutionary government, for example, was to establish the Archives Nationales in 1790. Modern archives were distinguished from those of *anciens régimes* not by the fact of their existence or their use in historical writing, but in their idealised role as egalitarian institutions, both free and open to the public. Access to the Archives Nationales was guaranteed as an essential right of all French citizens.⁵

In certain ways, centralising state control and physical possession of government documents in the nineteenth century did increase archival accessibility through the compilation of new inventories, catalogues and finding aids, as well as through the publication of selected archival documents.⁶ Yet the very promise of openness spawned a contradictory and equally potent desire to limit access, in terms of both seekers and documents sought. In the early years of Great Britain's Public Record Office, for example, first established in 1838, the Keepers limited access to those 'sufficiently qualified by age, knowledge and discretion'. Usage favoured those who were already familiar with archival systems. More significantly, the Home and Foreign Offices, as well as other branches of government, demanded exemption from committing all classes of documents to public inspection, particularly those